**For Impact: The Charity Podcast**

**Episode 5 – Why good charity endings matter (and how to have one)**

**Felicia:** Welcome to For Impact: The Charity Podcast. We're here to give voice to the sector and talk about the taboos and challenges holding it back and what we can do about it. Our topic today is why good charity endings matter and how to have one. I'm Felicia Willow, a consultant and interim CEO, also known as the Mary Poppins of the charity sector. I work directly with charities on governance, strategy and change, and increasingly look across the sector to address the systemic issues that hold For Impact organisations back. I've also recently launched a new service, Interims for Impact, a service offering interim support to charities to help them navigate challenges in a more sustainable and resilient way. I'm joined by my co-host Chris Pitt from the Benefact Group.  
  
**Chris:** Thanks Felicia, it's great to be here again and I'm going to hold my hands up here because this is not a topic that I have thought about at all. Surely charities are all about exciting beginnings, about driving to critical outcomes, about hanging on with an unerring commitment to never fail in doing good, but I've quickly learned that that's tosh. And as I've been learning a lot through this podcast series, charities aren't organisations like any other. They have a life, they're born, they grow, they stall, they have growing pains and sometimes they need to end. So, I appreciate though that ending in the charity sector is a distinctly different prospect to the business world, for example. If you have a string of start-up businesses in your wake, you're an entrepreneur, you're dynamic, you're creative. If you're a charity CEO and you have a string of closed charities in your recent past, would you be viewed in the same way? I kind of think not.

So, despite the fact that a charity CEO may well be one of the most strategic and impactful leaders you will ever meet, I think there's a real taboo here which we've got to shed some light on. If there are no endings in the charity sector, it's stagnant and it's not doing its job.

**Felicia:** That's so true. And it's really interesting when you think about the fact that most charities have a vision of the time in which they won't be needed. You know, the first thing we do in strategy is vision, mission, value. So, vision, when the disease is cured, when the social need is addressed. So, in a way, endings are built into our very existence in a way that they're not in the business sector, yet somehow in reality, we see the exact opposite attitude coming through.

So today we're talking to the people who are helping make that shift from taboo to transparency. We're joined by four brilliant guests, Iona Lawrence, Chief Decelerating Officer from The Decelerator, which helps charities navigate systemic change and closure with humanity and care, Richard Litchfield, the CEO of Eastside People, who's right in the thick of mergers and restructures amongst other things, and executive coaches Alison Lucas and Lizzie Bentley-Bowers, whose new book, Good Bye, is all about helping leaders navigate endings of all kinds. Here is Iona Lawrence, the Chief Decelerating Officer from The Decelerator. Tell me about The Decelerator. What exactly does it do?

**Iona:** So, at its core, I think our main function is to challenge the idea that endings, perhaps closure in the context of this conversation, equal failure or defeat. I think too often in the charity sector, closing a project or coming to the end of a leadership period, particularly perhaps if you're a founder or winding up a charity, is often seen as the thing that we most want to avoid. It's a sort of dark and shadowy place as a charity sector. But I suppose at The Decelerator, and this is partly born of my own experience, that organisational endings are part and parcel of what it takes to lead and manage high quality, impactful organisations. And when handled well, they become an opportunity for renewal, impact and transformation. And arguably, those are the things we need at this moment in time. There are sort of so many different strains on the sector that we'll come on to talking about. And so approaching transitions and closures in particular with care, an eye on legacy and impact and dignity is just so important.

And so the things that we practically do day to day, we're a sort of relatively small team, me and one other are full time and then a tranche of these amazing freelancers. We proffer or offer direct support. So we run a confidential hotline, which is the first port of call for anyone who has a thought or a feeling that something might need to be ending all the way through to kind of in the midst of planning or delivering something and they want a sounding board. And that is totally free at the point of use because we believe that this stuff is too easily sat in the shadows. And it's the thing that people just ignore. But then we also know that we aren't the only people that can do this work.

So we deliver trainings and workshops for funders and others who can all, we believe, take more of a kind of proactive, supportive, enabling role in a kind of charity sector that's changing. And then ultimately, we're trying to seed other decelerators. We don't think that what the world needs is one decelerator. So we work in partnership with others, including, for example, some faith groups on what faith based deceleration and things look like. And then ultimately, we're about moving money and power and policy so that this stuff isn't kind of demonised, I suppose, in the ways in which it's supported. Many people think that we're the grim reaper, like that once you call us, it's curtains for you. But at the moment, 50% of people who call us don't go on to enact their ending, whether it's a closure or anything else. But we have 100% satisfaction rate, which demonstrates the kind of dream that we have, which is that making space for possible endings and putting them on the table actually strengthens your position, like it creates a stronger conviction that what you're doing right now is really worth it. So, yeah, that's a bit about us.

**Felicia:** No, I think it's absolutely brilliant. And I feel like it comes up since I discovered your existence, I must have referred a couple of dozen organisations to you. I think it's such an important conversation to be having and support to be out there. So tell me, what inspired the creation of the decelerator? What gap did you see? Why did you think this was necessary? It might seem a stupid question given it's so obviously necessary. But what was the thinking at the time?

**Iona:** Well, it wasn't where I set out to end up, Felicia, so it's a very valid question. And lots of people do say, like, why on earth do you do that?

I had the pleasure and privilege of running a foundation for my friend Joe Cox, the MP who was killed in 2016. And in setting that up, we were a spend-out foundation. And for the period I ran it, especially in hindsight, it's clear that that was my superpower. Our superpower was basically trying to turbocharge progress on the stuff that Joe had cared about most but not trying to embed ourselves in the landscape. So we were campaigning for a Minister for Loneliness or we're trying to turbocharge community connectedness through the great get together, all with the kind of deep belief that we had to work in partnership because we ourselves were spend out. And so when in early stages of Covid, I found myself freelancing and I met a brilliant woman called Louise Armstrong, who's now my co-founder, we started sort of looking at what good closures looked like and a few articles and tools turned into some organisations wanting to call us, which turned into a flood of organisations wanting to call us, which turned into some consultancy.

And then by, I suppose, 2023, I suppose, it became clear that, like, we spend a lot of time and money, rightly so, on beginnings and growth. We need ambitious civil society organisations out there doing brilliant, beautiful things, but particularly in a precarious, changing landscape that leaves those that are no longer serving their purpose or have perhaps, like, had this kind of amazing sort of blaze of glory, but needing now to think about their closure or ones where twists of fate and things outside of their control are requiring them to think about closure. They just end up getting hung out to dry. And so, we came up with the framing of sort of decelerator as a play on the idea that we have all these accelerators. We have start up schemes and leadership programmes and funding rounds, all to start and grow things. And it comes to the end. And more often than not, we find ourselves speaking with organisations who think that there's nothing and no good to come out of the position they find themselves in. And so, what we're doing is gently challenging that assumption.

And I suppose, as I said at the beginning, part of this is about challenging the concept of failure. Part of it is about challenging the kind of very profound sense that so many of us have, that survival at all costs is the kind of dominant mindset for the sector. But it's also because like all sorts of things are going on right now, whether it's shifts in funding, governance challenges, outdated models and legal structures, leadership deficits. There are so many challenges in the sector, which when they all kind of pile up at the door of an organisation, we know that they need practical support. They need immediate relief, and they need immediate people who cannot just attend to the practicalities, which are all too often what people assume closures need. Oh, you need a lawyer, an accountant. You also need someone who can help you as a leader run a human redundancy process if you have the time and money available to attend to what you feel as you let go of programmes that beneficiaries have come to rely on and what that looks like and how you can lead well through that. And so, we are also about inserting the kind of emotions and the relationships back into a space where all too often it's the left to the sort of really important but not holistic enough kind of technical, practical, legal support.

And ultimately, funders and grantees are struggling, we believe, in similar waters right now. We hear funders say that they hear too late that organisations are thinking about closure and so they can't do anything to help. But equally, grantees don't talk to them early enough because they're worried that they'll do the thing that funders can do, which is withdraw money. And so, we're really trying to build the bridge, I suppose, between those two perspectives and acknowledge that in a changing civil society and charity sector, we need funders and grantees to try and work together.

**Felicia:** There's huge fear about telling funders what's going on. And sometimes it's only you tell them when you're hoping they're going to step in and be the extreme saviour in a situation. So, yeah. So, from your vantage point, what trends or patterns are emerging? What are you seeing across the sector at the moment that perhaps those of us that aren't working in this point of view might not be seeing?

**Iona:** So, it would be really tempting to say, like, really simple answers and just be like, it's all funding or it's all burnout. Yeah.

**Felicia:** Solve that and we're fine.

**Iona:** But I mean, this is way too overused, isn't it, Felicia? But like we live in complex times and those complexities are showing up, as you know, because this is the stuff you do every day. These are showing up at the doorsteps of organisations. And so, yes, there is a funding challenge. And I know that your last episode focused on the sort of funding freeze, as some people are calling it. And I think funding is a challenge right now. I think perhaps like 360Giving's latest data is likely to suggest that overall philanthropy isn't decreasing. And the real challenge here is local authorities. And that's why we see organisations like legal aid organisations, health and social care organisations all coming through our door because they are the people at the kind of cutting edge of that retraction.

And we also see that like a lot of people come to us saying, well, we're running out of money. But then once we're on a call with them and we've helped them take a bit of a breath and we're starting to explore their position, those initial concerns they have about funding are then sort of joined by all of these other challenges. And so, we see a lot of burnouts in the sector. And that's particularly at a leadership level. We're seeing lots of really experienced Chief Execs, for example, deciding not to be Chief Execs anymore and going into freelancing, which is creating sometimes, I mean, a bit of a drain away from the kind of leadership roles of people who know how to handle and support and cope with better endings. We're also seeing a lot of conflict. So, where resource scarcity sets in, where cuts are happening and an organisation is trying to cut corn, like sort of cut a budget down, if they enter that state for too long, I think we haven't yet managed to get a big enough data set.

But like basically those are the conditions in which conflict emerge. So, whether it's conflict between staff and trustees, different levels of staff, perhaps senior management and junior staff within sectors where competition has always been a factor, but now it's even more of a factor and that conflict is becoming really paralysing. So sometimes I think there are options that an organisation could put on the table, but they can't even get in the same room in order to talk about those things because there's so little trust and so little sort of social fabric left in an organisation. And all of that is happening at a time where one of the other big significant shifts are like the shift to hybrid and remote working, which has totally changed the way in which we build and hold relationships. And some of it is really amazing and brings so much value to the sector. But it also means if you're trying to take difficult decisions online with no easy answers, with a big group of people that you don't feel like you properly know or that you necessarily feel trusted by, then it can be so difficult to navigate that. And those are just like some of the things.

I think ultimately, we talk a lot about like there are kind of different assumptions, I think, about what's going on right now. We don't feel like we can say this is exactly what's going on. But some people think that we're in a time of short-term glitches. If we just sort of hold on and push through, the money will start flowing again. People want to do the jobs they no longer want to do. Volunteers will start volunteering again. All these kind of big shifts. And we can just get back to business as usual. Or you think, I think in terms of like longer term, more seismic shifts. And this is the sort of thing that Cathy Evans at Children England was talking about when she closed that infrastructure body, which is like we've built a charity sector on in conditions, on foundations that no longer exist. And that is both quite horrifying and terrifying when we think about the needs that might be unmet in the decades ahead. But unless we grasp that reality, unless we support people to really face into those challenges, we're going to end up in unmanaged decline where we have no strategy or intention behind what we might be needing to leave behind.

**Felicia:** Yeah, absolutely. Just on that mental health point, the work that was done recently, if anyone listening is worth looking up the Fair Collective's breaking point research, definitely worth a read. Obviously, quite a depressing read in a lot of ways, talking about the state of the mental health in leaders in the sector. But really important work being done to start talking about this. And I think this question around having these real conversations, you know, I do a lot of governance reviews, and one of the things I think really holds organisations back are some norms around group dynamics and politeness and not having frank conversations. And I think that that is something I see across the sector. We have to get better at having difficult conversations and sharing our views and thrashing things out. And I think endings are so one of those taboos that people don't want to acknowledge is even on the table. And yeah, massive problem.

For listeners who might be grappling with the idea of closure, what should they know? How can the decelerator support them? What first steps should they be taking?

**Iona:** Great question. So, one of the kind of things of being a relatively new organisation is that we often hear like, oh, I wish I'd known about you six months ago when I was in the midst of this thing, because it felt really lonely. And so, I suppose the first thing to say is like, you're not alone, just because this is this dark and shadowy place of charity sector life. It doesn't mean that there aren't actually hundreds, if not more, thousands of organisations facing similar dilemmas to the ones that you might be facing and that this stuff is really tough and emotional work. If you find yourself, we often hear people say, oh, I can't believe this is going to happen on my watch because we all feel such a sense of responsibility. And that is a kind of an amazing thing about our sector. But it also means that we can't necessarily be the best people to know when the right time is to put something on the table.

And so, the next thing I'd say is like, don't underestimate trusted places for support. And so obviously, I would say the Decelerator hotline is full of wildly brilliant, thoughtful, experienced people ready to give you space to take a breath, to step back and to think about all possible options. And those spaces are so crucial. Like we often hear from people like, oh, gosh, I haven't had a chance to just stop in like months, if not years. And it doesn't have to be us. It could be another help desk or hotline. It could be a consultant that you trust and know. It could be a coach. But basically, don't keep it to yourself. And then, as you just said, putting these questions on the table needs to be reframed as a courageous, compassionate, impact focused act. It's really possible to do this stuff with dignity and with care. And like that is something that I think we assume just gets chucked out the window as soon as an insolvency practitioner comes knocking.

And of course, like insolvency is in our opinion, not the conditions in which you do this stuff well, but it's inevitable in some cases. And even in those situations, as much as in the much more upstream ones, you can take care of people and staff and volunteers and trustees and beneficiaries. But that takes time and money and thought. And so, leaving it to the like 11th hour and then saying like, you know, calling us and saying, you know, we think we're going insolvent tomorrow, we will always pick up the phone. There's always things we can do to help. But if you could have called us four board meetings ago when there was an elephant in the room and you needed to have raised it, but you didn't know how to, that is where you can set yourself up for success.  
  
**Felicia:** That was Iona Lawrence from The Decelerator. Now we're speaking with Richard Litchfield, the Chief Exec at Eastside People. So, we're talking about endings in this episode, and I know that Eastside People do more than endings, but I also know you do a lot of restructures, mergers and endings of different kinds. So, can you just tell me a bit about what you do in the area of endings?

**Richard:** Of course, we have a number of things that are going on in this area. The first is merger work, which we started probably now back in 2010, 2011, so donkeys years ago. And we really wanted to set up a service that had a number of features to it. So firstly, that it was proactive. It could help organizations to proactively search for other partners that it would cover each phase of a merger process. And there's tends to be three exploration, development and implementation. And we also wanted to educate, and I suppose change mindsets. And so, we do quite a lot of publications work. We run roundtables for Chief Execs. We do an annual survey on the number of mergers that are getting done. And I very much hope that it's not done in a preachy way and that literally every single case we learn a lot from ourselves. So, I suppose we see it as part of our role to try and then disseminate and recycle some of that.

**Felicia:** So, a lot of the charities I've worked with feel like mergers are a failure. And I know that's something you feel really strongly about. So, tell me about your view of this.

**Richard:** I like to think of mergers kind of in the space of first principles. And I suppose that's what I really love about the sector's work. So, I kind of come at this from the point of view that it shouldn't be about the boundaries of our organizations. And I know that that can sometimes feel like a very academic thing to say. And I remember actually a colleague of mine who was a Chief Exec in the refugee sector and then came and worked with us would kind of smile wryly about the competitiveness of the refugee sector and the concentration of funding, which I think is driving local derbies. And I'm sure many people would resonate and understand that.

But I think if you think about this from the point of view that we are the for impact sector, we're mission led, we're driven by our values and certainly most charity people that I meet and work with, I'm sure the same for you too, Felicia, are driven by those values and I think are really deeply concerned with how they can improve the lot for beneficiaries that they're working with. Then I think the implication of all of that, if you go back to first principles, then collaborating or merging is kind of one of those tools that mean that we can do more, that we can serve more people, that we can be more effective. And when they work, they offer this amazing transformational potential about growing our impact. So, I don't think it's for me, merger is about failure or it's even about distress or rescue. And I think therefore, in that light, I kind of find it hard to understand why it's just not kind of routine, good practice to be exploring mergers. And that's really what we've been on a mission to make a shift in mindsets around.

**Felicia:** For what it's worth, when I do a governance review, it's one of my questions. Have you ever considered it? Do you look at partnership working? And sometimes I had some pushback on that too. So, it's interesting. And one of the things I feel quite strongly about is around restructures. You know, I do a lot of them myself and I don't feel like charities look to do this early enough. And if they change, perhaps they've been larger and they've started shrinking, but they keep that big management team or there's something that's happened that's changed, but they don't shift and do restructures so that they're really efficient for their current structure. So, what are you seeing around the area of restructures and what's your opinion about that?

**Richard:** I'd likely agree with you. I mean, I think restructures are such a kind of juicy topic that has, you know, it's like they have so many different layers to them. But I suppose more than anything, my experience has been that I've seen a lot of tinkering around the edges, but I don't think the more transformational restructures happen as much as they could. And I really like this idea of humane detachment. I don't know if you've come across it, but actually someone put me in my LinkedIn group, Alex Wright, put me on to it, and I think it kind of perfectly sums up what, in my view, we could be doing more of, which feels like we actually need to be both more hard-nosed and kind of more compassionate all at all at the same time. So, the detachment bit for me is the dry logic that we just need to be a sustainable and have a sustainable charity to do our work, to do it well. And that means that we do need to have our income, and our costs aligned. And with so much uncertainty around, I think many charities are struggling with that.

And I'm sure you'll agree that it's much better to do a cut once and do it properly than have to do these kinds of micro incremental cuts that leave everybody really uncertain for the for the future. And then for me, the humane bit is that we just need to make sure that if we're the people who are making those decisions, that we're transparent, that we own them, that we justify them. And I think that we give space to those folks who are at the wrong end of those decisions to really have time to understand what their needs are, and I suppose more than anything, to kind of resist that urge to get the hell out of dodge as quickly as possible, but to stay there and kind of be with them.

And there's one I think I just wanted to, if it's okay, just to plug a little bit that we're doing in this area, because I'm super excited about it in 2025, that we're for the first time offering an outplacement service. And so, this is kind of for any organisation that's doing a restructure and knows that some staff will be lost. And it's an offer for people who are leaving. And it's kind of a really nice, compassionate care, I think, for those at the sharp end of charities' decisions to cut back. And through our recruitment team, we help those individuals with CV advice, coaching and job search.

**Felicia:** Oh, that's great. Yeah, no, fantastic. So, trend-wise, when you've got these vantage points working across the sector, what are you seeing at the moment?

**Richard:** Well, I suppose the biggest thing I'm seeing is what feels like a perfect storm, a kind of perfect storm at the external macro level, and then a perfect storm for individual organisations in terms of their own business model and financing. That does, for me, feel different to what I've been seeing for a number of years post-COVID, where I've been arguing that actually it was really hard to see trends and it was almost like in each part of the sector, whether it was, say, homelessness or substance misuse or disability charities or wherever it might be, that they were kind of going at their own pace and speed, depending on what factors were relevant there for them in those kind of micro sectors. But right now, you've got these massive systems announcements coming through, kind of USAID and DFID for international aid charities. You've got, just in the last couple of weeks, the announcements about 50% cuts to ICS spending and NHS England. And then we've got all of the NI changes that are about to come through for pretty much all charities.

So, I think for that reason, it feels like incredibly challenging. And then the impact of that, certainly from the organisations that we're working with at the moment, seems to be there's ever more pressure on business models, on capacity and on, I suppose, aligning people to the services that need delivering. So, it's probably no surprise to say that a lot of our work, whether it's mergers or slightly broader, is about helping organisations to, I suppose, understand and then manage their way through that funding crunch. Is that the same for you, Felicia, just out of interest?

**Felicia:** Oh, definitely. I'm getting so much, yeah, so many more crisis advice kind of problems. And yeah, that's exactly what I'm seeing as well. It's really frightening. And interestingly, I was working with a children's charity recently who worked through schools and with the local authority. And talking to schools, it's the same. Talking to the local authority is the same, the funding cuts are cutting everywhere. And of course, at the end of the day, this was a children's charity, it's the children from deprived areas whose situations are getting worse. But all of the services that are there to support them are also all on a knife's edge. And it's quite terrifying. It's a really scary time, I think.

**Richard:** Yeah, it's such a good point. It's probably another podcast. But yeah, I'm a chair of governors at a local school, and it's just unbelievable the amount of work the teachers are having to do around special needs and mental health. And it's almost like running a charity within a school, but not that charity not being funded.

**Felicia:** Yeah, absolutely. Kids turning up hungry and everything. It's dreadful. Resistance to managing change at the right time in the right way seems like a really big issue, a really big challenge in the sector. So, what do you see in relation to resistance and how do you help organisations through that?

**Richard:** Yeah, I see resistance in many different shapes and forms and probably happening at different stages of situations and different parts of organisations. But just to pick a couple of examples, so I think there's a kind of self-awareness resistance around perhaps people not being completely honest to themselves about the real situation that they're faced with. And I don't think that's about anyone being disingenuous. I just think that when you're running 100 miles an hour at a cause that you love and you're deeply rooted in the day to day, it's just hard to hold a mirror up and take a step back. But I think that's huge. I think in our work, talking about mergers earlier, that not exploring mergers early enough, resistance to that, resistance to not making cuts quickly enough, we've talked about.

And then the other one that I'd like to pick out is something about almost a complacency that we're the only ones doing this really well. And so, a kind of resistance to this actual observation and openness to what others are doing and that actually others are probably doing it better than us in some ways. We're all special, but we're not all unique as organisations.

**Felicia:** It's so interesting, so often on this podcast, we kind of ask people what they would say, and they often say that you're not alone. And I think it's so interesting that there seems to be a real assumption in a lot of different parts of the sector that people are on their own, whether it's dealing with the challenges or whether it's grappling with this crisis or whatever else it is they feel on their own. And actually, we need to get so much better about talking about these things, which of course is why this podcast exists. But it does feel like if we could communicate better and share these experiences, we would feel a lot less alone a lot of the time.

And speaking of, if someone's listening now, a board member or CEO, they've got this perfect storm going on, they're in a difficult situation, they're grappling with these issues. What advice would you give them about what they should do?

**Richard:** Yeah, I think there's kind of two things that immediately come to mind on this one. So, I think the first one just has to be understand the financial situation that you're in as quickly as possible. And you don't need to be a financial person to do that. In fact, if you're non-financial, then I think you just need to keep asking the questions until you feel like you've got clarity, and you've got the information that you need. And then the second one, what I would recommend is that the key people, the key decision makers, often Chief Exec and Chair, but could be broader than that, get in a room together and really figure out how are we going to take responsibility for which bit of this journey. So, this is a real how. You're not solving the problem, but you're just agreeing right up front who's going to do what.

And my preference is that the Chief Exec or the most senior executive deals with Plan A, deals with business as usual and trying to make the organisation as sustainable as it can in the here and now. And then the Chair and the Board deals with Plan B, which might be about finding a merger partner. It could be in the most challenging of situations, be about when and how to go into insolvency. But I think that those decisions shouldn't rest with the Chief Exec alone. And so those would be my two tips.

And I suppose maybe if I could just add one other thing to say and recognise it's been maybe quite a bleak topic in some ways today, but I'm really a kind of eternal optimist. And I suppose the thing that I've learnt more than anything over the years is that there's an amazing range, I think, of different possibilities and ways for organisations to innovate, to diversify, to restructure, to save themselves. And so, I think people should and can go into these situations also with optimism. And I think probably more than anything, the key thing is time. If you spot the dangers early enough, then the more time, the more options you have.

**Felicia:** That was Richard Litchfield of Eastside People. Last but not least, we have our first ever double interview. So, I'll let them introduce themselves, so you know who is who.

**Alison:** My name is Alison Lucas. I'm an Executive Coach and the co-author of Good Bye.   
  
**Lizzie:** And I'm Lizzie Bentley Bowers, co-author of Good Bye and also an Executive Coach who's been working with Alison for, oh gosh, how many years now, a lot, a lot of great years.

**Felicia:** Brilliant. Well, thank you both so much for on the podcast. To start off with, could you tell me a bit about your book, Good Bye

**Alison:** Yes. Thank you, Felicia. I think leaders spend an awfully long time thinking about new beginnings, thinking about the time and the effort and the money and the energy that goes into them. And very little time is spent on endings. And in the couple of decades that Lizzie and I have been working with our clients and listening to them, we've really noticed what the impact is for the individuals and organisations of not attending to those endings. And really, there's a myriad of endings, every day they're inevitable. And we wanted to create a resource, a book, to help leaders navigate those endings because they're really important and there's not much out there to support leaders in knowing how to do that.

**Lizzie:** Yeah, the first thing we did when we started to talk about this in our work was turn to the bookshelves, as we often do, and turn to the practitioners and the thinkers and the researchers that we value most highly. And not only could we not find a book on this topic, we struggled to find much reference to this topic in the indexes of the books that we most valued. So that led us on a bit of an inquiry, really, into what is out there around how to end well in organisations, whether it's a positive ending, whether something good is coming to a close and is a sort of final flourish, or whether it's a more challenging ending, and we found very little. So, the book came about because we decided there was a gap in the bookshelf that we wanted to fill.

**Felicia:** Fantastic. So why do you think endings are so hard to face, especially in purpose-driven sectors like charities?

**Lizzie:** I think there are a lot of reasons why endings are hard to face. But if I can take your point about charities particularly, I think there's something about when we are purpose-driven, when there's something we are trying to change for good in the world, whether that be a community that we're trying to build or a cause that we're trying to promote or raise funds for, when we're trying to do good in the world, it's particularly counterintuitive to stop doing it or to stop doing an aspect of it. So, they don't really sit brilliantly, energetically, to think of endings and to think of the good that you're trying to do in the world. When we're trying to do good, we're doing, there's a constant sort of drive to do. And both strategically and energetically, if we're thinking about pausing, stopping, closing, we might either consciously or unconsciously have a sense that we're preventing that contribution from taking place anymore.

So, I think it feels counterintuitive to think about endings anyway. That's been our experience with leaders. But particularly when there's something that you're trying to cause that's good in the world, it doesn't sit well to be thinking about, oh, how do we stop this good thing from happening?

**Felicia:** I see a lot of charities struggling with endings. And I think a lot of it's because they can still see the need that's there, but it's the charity itself that has failed in the process. And that can be a really, really painful process. What do you see as the main barriers preventing leaders from accepting and navigating endings well?

**Alison:** I think that's such a great question, because I think it's at the heart of what we talk about in Good Bye. I think the first one is back to what Lizzie was saying about turning to the bookshelf and there is just no guidance out there. Leaders aren't taught to even orientate towards an ending, let alone know how to deal with it, back to the shiny beginnings. But endings are so difficult. And it's not part of the leadership lexicon. And it's not part of organisational development for people even to be talking about, well, what about the other side of this because with every beginning becomes an ending.

And I think the other thing is that it is so wrapped up in emotion and it's so wrapped up in the emotional vulnerability that many leaders will face if they are looking at endings, whether or not it's making somebody redundant or team ending because they're merging or the sort of endings that you're talking about, Felicia, which are those existential, really, really deeply painful, difficult endings of maybe this charity will not be here in a year's time. And I think that dealing with the emotion is really, really hard. A lot of what comes with endings is loss. And there's many different sorts of loss that will come up with an ending. It could be loss of identity, loss of purpose, loss of certainty, loss of personal income, because you're no longer going to be driving and having a salary from that. So, I think there's the ability to sit with the discomfort of all of those emotions and the discomfort of other people's emotions, because we're navigating endings. A lot of strong emotions come up. There might be anger. There might be sadness. Many different sorts of emotions will be prevalent. And so, a leader needs to be able to do their own work first, to be able to lead others. And they're not even taught how to do their own work first.

**Felicia:** I think that's really such an interesting point that it's actually about the leaders having to do that work and be able to do it first. Obviously, I work a lot with boards and I see a lot of reluctance to do things like restructures, redundancies, those kind of things, which can actually enable a charity to survive beyond an immediate crisis, but it are, of course, an ending in themselves. And I do get a lot of CEOs and chairs contacting me talking about what they should do, what they can do. But if leaders of organizations, of charities and chairs are listening to you now, and at some level, they know it's time to do something, it might be to wind down an organization, it might be to merge or to make a major structure change, do a redundancy process, restructure, we are in really difficult times right now. There's a perfect storm around fundraising, everything is very, very difficult, so what would you advise those leaders to do in that situation?

**Lizzie:** I think the words that intrigue me most in your question are the at some level. I think in our experience, leaders have often thought about this and thought about what it is they might need to wind up or change for quite some time before they start to articulate it with other people. So that first step that we talk about in the process of approaching and working through a ‘Goodbye’ is a step that we call reality. And there's something about really naming that full reality. And rather than naming perhaps a part of the reality, maybe the broad brushstroke of the reality, and then starting to think about one aspect of it to really before you start going into any detail, start actually getting out of your head. So thinking outside yourself, perhaps with a thinking partner, perhaps on paper, but really getting out of the circular thinking of what might happen and what's happening into the full naming of the reality of what is coming to an end, why it needs to come to an end, when all of those kinds of things.

We talk about the tricky and messy stuff. There's something about naming that too. And again, naming it before we get into trying to solve it, just getting it all out there. And that's a step that's often skipped. We're kind of into how do we solve this aspect of it without really looking at that full picture. So, I'd advise them to pause, take some time, fully name that reality, get some help to do it if you need it. Be truthful with yourself. Be truthful so that you can prepare to be truthful with others. And there's something as you do that about staying aware that you are therefore always going to be further ahead in your thinking than others. So really taking care that as you start to name that reality, when other people join you there, to stay aware that they might be a few steps or many steps behind you in that thinking. So, holding your own experience and others.   
  
**Alison:** Yeah, I think what's really interesting about what Lizzie's saying there is we call that timing dissonance, which is why we always talk. So, our advice to CEOs and chairs facing this now would be you have to do your own work first before you can lead others through. And part of that is timing dissonance, the fact that you will have processed it and know more, and you may be more of the architect than those that you are then going to lead through that ending. I think what Lizzie's really been talking us through is the first step of the model, which is that you need to face the reality, and you need to start with yourself and face your reality before you can lead others. And then our advice would be to work through the other three steps, which is really work through what's going on for you emotionally. When you're ready, think about the accomplishments that you have been party to, that you've been the architect of, that you've been the leader of, that your team have been party to with you. And then think about how you want to close. What's the ritual that is going to be saying thank you and acknowledging the fact that something's come to an end. But I think our main message is you have to do your own work first about your relationship to the ending that's coming along before you can be truly, truly present and there for others.   
  
**Felicia:** Obviously, a good ending is a kind of balance between managing all of this emotional processing side of things with these practicalities. So, how do you think leaders can balance those two sides of organisational endings?

**Lizzie:** So, I think one of the things to have in mind here is to know your preferences. So, Alison's just talked about starting with yourself. So, whenever we're trying to get balance anywhere, to know ourselves well before we start trying to work out what that's in relationship with is a really good place to start. And there's also something about how the fact that there are, as you say, many practicalities to any kind of ending in an organisation, but every single one of those practicalities is going to have an emotional impact. It connects with all those things Alison said about loss. So, if we can be doing that work of acknowledging, understanding, accepting that there is more at play than the practicalities, we can start to give ourselves a way through the full remit of an ending rather than just aspects of it.

**Alison:** I think the other thing to add to that, Lizzie, is that it doesn't have to be either or. There's something about timing as well. So, sometimes having your head in practicality is really good because you have to power through, you have to be strong because you're about to be going out and talking to the team about what's going on. So, knowing when actually to do the emotional processing is really important because human beings are complex, and emotions are complex, and we don't feel one emotion at a time. So, you could be feeling relief that the decision has been taken out of your hand, optimism for what some of the team are talking about and guilt about your part that you've played. Or you could be feeling sadness about what is coming to an end, pride in what has been achieved and fear personally about what's next for you.

So, emotions are really, really complicated sometimes for people and so thinking about the timing and balancing of looking at your diary, what practically needs to be done and therefore where does the emotions fit into it so that you don't end up getting flooded yourself and no helpful help to anybody.

**Felicia:** I think that's such an excellent point that you feel multiple emotions at the same time. I was actually speaking to someone recently who had to close their charity and one of the things they felt really sad about was that there wasn't that celebration of all the wonderful things that had been done. There was actually so much anger and hurt and sadness about the fact that this was closing that they really felt that they'd been, hang on, we've been around for this amount of time, and we've done all these wonderful things. It's almost like you need to have space for all of them, don't you? You need to recognise that this is painful. You need to grieve. You need to also celebrate. I think that's so true. I think we are all complex creatures with challenging emotions to work through. I think that's such a good point.

**Alison:** Can I just come back in terms of that example? Often the emotion of the ending becomes the story and actually we're also talking about the emotions and accomplishments that came before. We might need to separate out the ending and the rawness of it and the anger and everything you described in that example to be able to go back to and we did serve this community and we did do this good in the world and it has come to an end. All three of those are sentences of truth and to be in that calm place, be able to do that, we need to work through the emotion of the ending itself.

**Felicia:** Yeah. As you're talking, I'm also thinking about I've seen a number of organisations where they've had to make really difficult decisions such as sell off a site that had particular interest and relevance for certain people who were supporting the organisation or stop a service that had a particular group of support and you often see that emotion then come at the charity for making that decision and it's almost like there's that recognition that outside external supporters are also going to have these emotions that need to be recognised and handled throughout a process as well. So yeah, really interesting. So, if there is one thing that you wish everyone knew about managing good endings, what would it be?

**Lizzie:** So for me, the thing that I keep coming back to again and again and again and that continues to move and surprise us even though we have now experienced it to be true is that endings create connection and we think of endings as a point of disconnect. But actually, when we pay attention to them, when we give them the full range of reality, emotion, the connection to those accomplishments, when we close them well, they create so much more connection than they break, and I find that both fascinating and beautiful.

**Alison:** In terms of that connection, where we started with all of this was wanting to bring a conversation to leaders about why attending to endings is so powerful and ending well, doing a goodbye, creates a brighter beginning for everybody involved, for yourself, for all of the team that may be going elsewhere, for all people left behind and people you go towards and truly believe that that brighter beginning is so much part of why attending to an ending is really worth it.

**Felicia:** You've just reminded me, when I was a child, my elder sister used to say to me, you're always so bad at endings but you're great at beginnings, so why don't you just see everything as a beginning? And it's one of those things, some words of wisdom that someone said to you when you're a child. She was older than me, obviously a lot wiser. Yeah, brilliant. Well, thank you both so much for your time. I really appreciate it. There's really useful insights in there.

**Lizzie:** Thank you, Felicia.

**Alison:** Oh, pleasure. Thank you. It's been a fantastic conversation.

**Felicia:** That was Alison Lucas and Lizzie Bentley Bowers. You can buy their book, Goodbye, at all good bookstores or your favourite online retailer.

**Chris:** It really strikes me that it's so important to very clearly distinguish between endings and failings. As we focused in a previous podcast, the headline charity completes its work incredibly effectively and moves on to a new challenge is no headline at all. So, it's more likely to be a failure story when it's quite the opposite. Ad continuing the business analogy, a closed startup is typically a spark for another idea that leads to another and another. Charities should be the same. If done well, a great charity mission has learnings spilling out of it. So, if society and need and the world has changed, as is always the case, charity leaders can take those learnings and move on.

**Felicia:** I do feel so strongly that we can do better with embedding these learnings. When you think about how much charities learn and develop as they go along. Interestingly, Eastside people have recently announced that they're taking on the Festival of Trusteeship, something that getting on board, which was a very beloved charity that sadly and unexpectedly closed not too long ago, was previously doing. So that was great news that came out recently.

**Chris:** Yeah, I would say it was really interesting that endings aren't also not so black and white, as is everything in life. There's a perception that endings mean charities just shutting up and that's it. But it's really not necessarily the case. Endings can mean merging work with another charity, developing a bigger programme of work to do more, but through another organisation. An ending can be a really successful celebration or recognising a fantastic legacy.

**Felicia:** Yeah, I mean I was working with an organisation recently. One of the options for them were actually to move some of their staff over to a partner organisation as they wound up. And it felt like that was a way of really continuing it on. But in all of this, the timing issue is so important. And I think it just comes back to having really honest and brave conversations all the time. I've worked with an organisation recently where a member of staff was treated appallingly for raising the alarm. And that charity is now facing a not very happy closure. And we need to do so much better than that. And if they'd listened, if they'd had the conversation, if they'd been really open about it, they'd be in a very different situation now.

**Chris:** Yeah, definitely. And another big realisation that hit me listening to these interviews was the fact that it's not just charity CEOs, founders and leaders that should be thinking and talking about endings and having these conversations. It's funders, it's us, its partners, it's wider society too. And we, and I speak as a funder, need to expect charities to end. It's natural. It's a sign of a really healthy sector. And it doesn't mean a waste of funding. It means charities are growing and developing and really tackling society's challenges.

**Felicia:** It's so interesting how we don't talk as a society about quitting things. I've recently been reading Quit by Annie Duke, which I think everybody should read. It's a great book. It's full of amazingly useful golden nuggets about the right time to walk away from something. And this isn't just organisational, this is talking from a personal perspective as well. But she makes points almost always earlier than you think it is. And she talks about the quitting bind, which is that if you quit something at the right time, people will think you quit too early. But if you don't, then everyone will say you quit too late. And she also says one of the ones that I keep coming back to is if you are struggling to decide between quitting and persevering, it's very likely that quitting is the better option. So, I think it's definitely worth a read for everyone. It really helps to build that idea about quitting being a valid and good choice. And the idea of perseverance and grit, which is something we really celebrate, perhaps over-celebrate as a society, is not always the right choice.

**Chris:** Well, that makes me think perhaps I need to be a better quitter. I'll have to think about that, reflect on that. And another theme that we picked up a lot on in our podcast is mental health and wellbeing. And clearly this is another big driver of the mental health and wellbeing challenges facing the sector at the moment. And I think too many CEOs, charity leaders are clinging on with unshakeable resolve driven by a fear of failure and a lack of support around them. And as a result, their mental health and the health of those around them and in their teams is suffering too.   
  
So, I think we've got to focus more on organisational health. If a charity organisation is a healthy system, which means ending at some point, then the people in them are healthy too. And the charities are ultimately achieving maximum impact in the world.

**Felicia:** I couldn't agree more. And I've been there myself, you know, doing everything and burning myself out in order to turn an organisation around. But perhaps a happy ending might've been a better result. So, thanks so much to our guests. I've learnt a lot. Thanks to our listeners and thanks to the Benefact Group for supporting this podcast.